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Afghan Patrol—A Platoon's- Eye View

Paktika Province,
Eastern Afghanistan

We were in a draw on a trail up a narrow gully, and it wasn't much past five o'clock in the evening, but it was so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I had remained in the Humvee with the driver and the turret gunner. My other two vehicle companions that past



Text and Photographs
By Paul Avallone



Strings indicate the grid lines and rocks show the routes in a sand table map of Charlie Company's area of operation for Operation Frozen Turkey, as commanding officer Capt. Steven Helm briefs his senior leaders on the operation.



week, the platoon sergeant and his radio man, had gotten out when we'd gone as far as we could up the draw and, joined by a half-dozen others from the platoon's trailing Humvees, had headed on foot farther up the trail.

An embedded journalist with these soldiers for nearly two weeks now, I had declined the invitation to go along with them on foot, figuring photographs were impossible in the pitch dark and the trail was ice-slick from the afternoon's frozen drizzle; besides, every NAI (noted or named area of interest) we'd investigated during the past four days of mounted and dismounted patrolling here in the mountains on the Pakistan border had turned up nothing, and there was little to indicate that this would be any different. It was better to stay warm and dry in the Humvee.

To turn the vehicle around for quick egress once the soldiers returned, driver Spc. Warren Davies III was using turret gunner Spc. James Greene as his exterior eyes; he still had to turn on the headlights to see that it would be nearly impossible to do in this narrow gully—not without trying to climb the steep rock walls. Forward a few feet,

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Acting platoon leader SFC Gonzalo Lassally briefs members of his platoon before a quick reaction force patrol out of Forward Operating Base Orgun-e in the days before kickoff of Operation Frozen Turkey.

back a few feet, forward a few feet, back and forth—it wasn't working. Davies finally gave up and got us straight again, facing up trail. Over the platoon and company radio nets, platoon sergeant SFC Gonzalo Lassally was saying they were at the NAI and there was a scattering of documents in the mud. To better search the area, Lassally said they would need some flashlights with white lights, instead of their red lenses, and maybe some mortar illumination rounds from the weapons' section set up back in the dry riverbed with the rest of the company. At last, a positive find at an NAI. That sounded great.

That last of that day's recons was for BDA (battlefield

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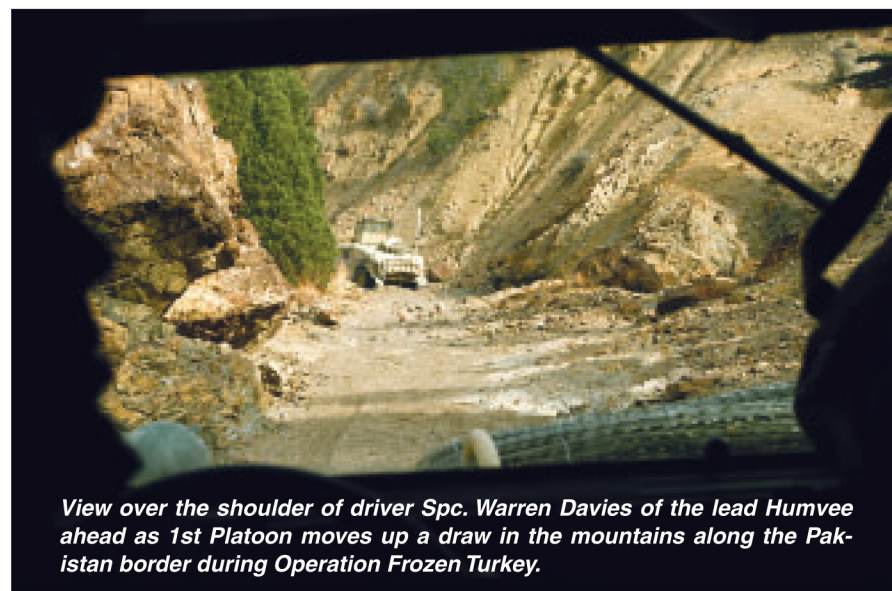


Patrolling the eastern Afghanistan landscape with 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry.

damage assessment), so intel had paid off. Then, from the turret, Greene yelled, "Contact, it's AK firing, they're in a TIC!" (A TIC, or tic, for troops in contact, is a new term for firefight.) After a moment, Davies and I, inside, also heard it: both the AKs and our own guys' M-4s firing. Then Lassally's voice over the radio nets: "We're in contact, we're in contact! Pulling back, pulling back!" Without hesitation, Davies started turning us around, with Greene again acting as his eyes from above. This time Davies punched the gas, ignoring the gully walls, gunned us up as far as the vehicle would go both front and rear, back and forth. This was serious. We had to get the foot patrol guys out of there as quickly as possible the moment they made it back. Meanwhile, Lassally's request to the company to "Fire the grid!" was coming over the radio, meaning: have our weapons' section as well as the long-range artillery back at the forward operating base (FOB) fire on the exact location of the NAI.

How Lassally and his small group wound up reconning that NAI, with the remainder of his platoon just a couple of hundred meters away down in the gully, with about a half-hour after last light, when BDA is best done in daylight, will be familiar to soldiers old and young. It's the Army; you just do it, you push it one step further, as orders come down

First Platoon on mounted patrol moves up a draw in the mountains along the Pakistan border.



View over the shoulder of driver Spc. Warren Davies of the lead Humvee ahead as 1st Platoon moves up a draw in the mountains along the Pakistan border during Operation Frozen Turkey.

from above, which, in this case, was the battalion command staff running a much larger operation of which our company was only one element. The battalion itself was but a part of a multiunit operation, but down on the platoon level, all one really cares about is the company's part.

It was November 2006. Two weeks earlier I had joined



Making the American presence felt as powerful but friendly, 2-87 soldiers patrol a remote mountain village known to be a Taliban way station.

(ANA) soldier killed and one of ours wounded.

No one would say it directly, but I could sense envy among our guys at other guys being tested under fire. These guys are infantry—proud Catamounts—and they can't hide it; they're fighters and can't help it; they're always competing with their sister companies. Combat, contact,

up with 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry, of the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), at the 2-87 Catamounts' eastern Afghanistan base, FOB Orgun-e. I was embedding for a platoon's-eye view of the year's last major operation, Frozen Turkey, the objective of which was to hunt Taliban by saturating the passes leading into Pakistan along the Paktika section of the border. The Catamounts would be reconning the mountain pass safe havens from which the Taliban were harassing FOB Bermel with random rocket firing, with the intent to clean them out before the coming winter's snow would close the passes until spring.

TICs: though no one says it, they're the markers.

Charlie Company had already seen its small fair share of fighting since the Taliban's summer offensive began, and the guys hadn't been back to their home base, FOB Wazakhan, for months, first deploying to Helmand province to help the British for Operation Mountain Thrust, then to neighboring Kandahar province, joining the Canadians for Operation Medusa, where they helped put a real hurt on massed enemy forces in the battle for a village called Panjawaii. During my own many TIC-free days patrolling with 1st Platoon, knowing that I was looking for an action

Charlie Company's Capt. Steven Helm welcomed me to his command, and 1st Platoon acting commander, SFC Lassally, cleared a seat in his Humvee for me. Frozen Turkey was put on hold for a few days which, in the theater-wide op tempo of the time, wound up being a week, until air assets could be freed up from elsewhere for the operation's necessary air recon and cover. After days of running less than dramatic on-call patrols out of Orgun-e, we moved to an even more forward operating base, Bermel, from which 2-87's three companies launched, each taking a sector of the border mountain range. My company, Charlie, took the middle, with Alpha and Bravo on the flanks, but in different valleys, out of sight, out of hearing—each company its own entity. And, according to the map, each too separated by distance and ridges to quickly come to the others' aid. It didn't matter; we were all still within range of the long guns at Bermel. And down at the platoon level, the guys really didn't know what the other companies were doing. Bravo Company got into a TIC, with the result being, as we heard over the radio nets, an Afghan National Army



Village children give the soldiers of 2-87 the thumbs-up during a mounted patrol in eastern Afghanistan.

story involving combat, many of the guys repeated the refrain, "You should have been with us in Panjawaii."

The Afghan theater had sure grown hotter since I was there as a Green Beret three years earlier, back in 2002-03. In 2006, during my multiple months as a civilian embedded journalist, I was continually irked by American news reporting (available through the Internet at the FOBs), criticizing the Bush administration for ignoring Afghanistan while diverting resources to Iraq. As I remembered it, in

Two soldiers of the ANA company participate in the five-day recon patrol with Charlie Company in the mountains along the Pakistan border. Equipped by the U.S. with the older style BDUs and brand new Ford Ranger pickups, the ANA still relies on a hodgepodge of weaponry, like Kalashnikov rifles and Soviet RPGs.



Lacking typical American gear such as body armor and helmets, the ANA has no shortage of warrior attitude, as this soldier shows, with his crisscrossed ammo bandoliers and at-ready PKM machine gun during a dismounted presence patrol with 2-87 through rural villages.

my active duty time here, the U.S. military presence was approximately 9,000 troops.

In 2006, it was at about 20,000. Now I was visiting battalion-plus sized bases like Orgun-e, which in 2003 I had known just as names of very remote Special Forces (SF) outposts for my sister teams. FOBs Bermel, Wazakhan and a slew of others did not even exist back then. Lonely outposts for single SF teams, like Gardez in Paktya province and Jalalabad in Nangahar province, had become full FOBs and PRTs (provisional reconstruction teams), with the latter actually becoming Jalalabad Air Field, with permanently stationed rotary-wing aircraft. North of Jalalabad in Kunar province there had been Asadabad, an outpost which in 2003 consisted of three SF teams, a Civil Affairs team and an Airborne infantry company, all total, with nothing more in that entire province and its northern neighbor, Nuristan province. By 2006, Asadabad had grown and was then supporting a handful of outlying FOBs and PRTs established all the way up into Nuristan.

In sum, in 2003 the United States was in command of and responsible for the entire country; by autumn 2006, NATO was in command, with the only U.S. sector of responsibility being eastern Afghanistan. Yet the U.S. forces had more than doubled since 2003. So much for the media's contention of America's perceived neglect of Afghanistan.

Added to the two-fold increase in our own forces, the United States' building of the Afghan National Army also was well under way. In fact, Charlie Company had an ANA company attached for Frozen Turkey, as did the other companies of 2-87.

Because of permanent turnover, desertion and persistent AWOL, an ANA company is generally platoon-heavy sized; still, they are solid first steps in the formation of what must eventually become the country's premier security forces. Presently, the ANA battalions are mentored by ETTs (embedded training teams) from the U.S. military. The ETT with the ANA battalion at Orgun-e consisted of officers and enlisted men of the Oregon National Guard's 41st Infantry Brigade Combat Team. The two captains and two senior enlisted soldiers mentoring the ANA company operating with Charlie Company for Frozen Turkey were essential as liaisons between the ANA command and Capt. Helm, as well as for smoothing out the differences in tactics and operating tempo.

Two ANA soldiers stand by an uncovered 122 millimeter rocket launcher discovered by chance hidden off the trail. As the report of the find was passed up the command, word came down that First Platoon's find was the first intact, operational enemy 122 launcher captured since the war began.



In the foreground are a Soviet elevation device and firing initiator found with a 122 rocket launcher, as Charlie Company Commander Capt. Steven Helm radios higher the report of the find.

For three days we patrolled the draws and ridges of our sector, investigating the NAIs with no positive results. The battalion intel guys had determined the NAIs by computing the enemy's rocket launch trajectory as well as drone aerial recon. By midday on Day Four, one of our turret gunners spotted something suspicious off the trail. It turned out to be a 122 mm rocket-launch tube and rocket rounds camouflaged in the pine trees. A compass and map reading showed the launch tube to be aimed on an exact azimuth at FOB Bermel a straight-line dozen kilometers away. It was a good find, by pure luck, thanks to the sharp eyes of the gunner. There had been a 122-rocket attack on Bermel the week before, with one round exploding right at the front gate, so taking this out of the enemy's hands was a real plus.

The rest of the NAIs reconned that afternoon proved to be like the earlier ones—nothing—until we were sent to the last, in the growing dark, for BDA. The relayed word to us was that the night before, aerial spy imagery had revealed armed men moving around the area and an AC-130 gun-

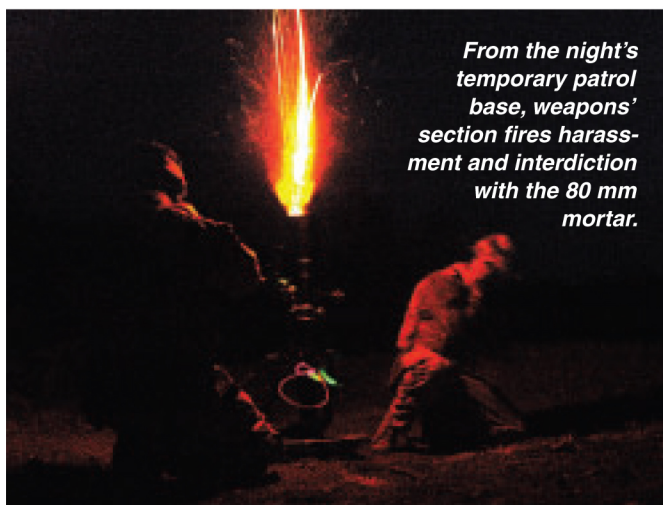


ship had raked the hillsides with its 20 mm gun—thus, the BDA for us to check, and Lassally and his handful getting into that TIC up that draw, while the rest of the platoon waited in their vehicles in the gully. Davies turned our vehicle around in not more than a couple of back-and-forths now that it really mattered, and Lassally's group was back to us in no more than a couple of minutes after the initial contact.

All intact: none injured. As we headed back down the gully, racing then, with the headlights on—it didn't matter anymore—we could see the flashes and hear the booms of our own mortar rounds firing the grid behind, as Lassally had ordered.

It was 50 percent alert that night in our patrol base back in the dry riverbed. A massed attack was not expected, but everyone now knew that the enemy truly was out there somewhere, with the potential for sniping, rocket-propelled grenades or mortar attacks. Our own mortar section fired illumination and harassment/interdiction fire at random intervals throughout the night. The ETTs managed a minor miracle, convincing the ANA not to have their traditional nighttime campfires.

There was no question as to the next day's priority mission, and 1st Platoon went back up that gully draw at first



From the night's temporary patrol base, weapons' section fires harassment and interdiction with the 80 mm mortar.

light, as far as we could in the vehicles, like the previous evening, then up the trail on foot. The ETT had their ANA up on the ridgelines as flank security, paralleling our movement. We passed where Lassally informed us was the previous night's TIC. A couple of hundred meters further up the trail we found a body—right there on the trail, wrapped in a thin white blanket. Then we found a second body further up, on a side trail, also wrapped in a white blanket. We saw no blood or signs of wounding at those locations; our consensus was that the bodies were being carried up the trail toward Pakistan just a kilometer or so away. There were no weapons. We can only speculate that the body bearers had been frightened away the night before by the mortar barrage or, perhaps more likely, by our arrival that dawn. Back down at the original TIC site, we found another body in the tree line. Again, no weapon, but later, back at FOB Bermel, the military intelligence soldiers' examination of the IDs and documents taken from the three bodies would show them to be of Arabic and Turkish origin.

The freezing rain returned, and Charlie Company was directed to return to FOB Bermel and prepare for movement back to its home base, a two-day drive away at Wazakhan. The guys liked that. When they'd left months before, it was supposed to be for only a few weeks, and they'd packed accordingly—heavy on the combat gear, light on the personal stuff, like clean uniforms, socks and underwear, as well as hygiene sundries, books, even their laptops. There was no hesitation in leaving the mountains and no apparent disappointment in the relative lack of drama in their part of the operation. It was as if they could smell home.

"We didn't see significant contact," Capt. Helm told me back at Bermel, "but we had some real tangible results. We disrupted their cross-border operations and showed them that they don't really have safe havens, that the Coalition forces, when we have intel on enemy movements and activities, are going to go out and find them."

Before the launch of Frozen Turkey, Capt. Helm had told me that his own goals for his company were to "accomplish the mission without getting anyone killed" and to



At first light, as 1st Platoon moves up the draw where SFC Gonzala Lassally's small element had gotten into a tic the night before, Capt. Steven Helm leads the second squad.



Spc. Bobby Sarchet documents the exact grid location of a body, while another soldier runs a metal detector over it to check for booby traps. This is the second of three dead bodies found in a narrow draw leading up to the Pakistan border just a kilometer away. Spotted (not pooled) blood on the blanket under the body indicate that the body was being carried off dead, up the pass to Pakistan, when the presence of the Americans or the subsequent attack scared the bearers off.

"do it smartly." He was successful on both accounts. "We hope to find the actual launch sites," he had told me. "Or at least chase the foreign fighters back over into Pakistan for the winter." Again, his soldiers were successful. Hardly a Pollyanna, he had added a realistic caveat: "After the snow melts, in the spring, we'll have to do it again."

That's what those bodies wrapped in white blankets, being carried up the trail toward Pakistan just a stone's throw away, signify—what their foreign documents tell us. U.S. forces can go into and clean out their safe havens, but only to a point—the point of the line demarking the border of Pakistan, across which the U.S. troops cannot venture. And it's not lost on Capt. Helm or his soldiers. Pakistan is the ultimate safe haven in which the enemy retires, repairs and refits, until "after the snow melts."

